

❧ ❧ ❧ A DISCUSSION OF THE  
REASONABLENESS OF PRAYER

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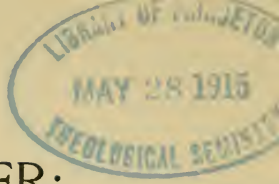
God and prayer

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GOD AND PRAYER.





# GOD AND PRAYER:

A DISCUSSION OF  
THE REASONABLENESS OF PRAYER.

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THE BEDELL LECTURES FOR 1895, DELIVERED IN THE  
COLLEGE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, GAM-  
BIER, OHIO, ON FOUNDERS' DAY, BEING  
THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS, 1895,

✓  
BY  
BOYD VINCENT, S.T.D.  
BISHOP COADJUTOR OF SOUTHERN OHIO.



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TO THE MEMORY OF

MY FATHER,

WHOSE DEEP DEVOUTNESS, REGULATED BY A STURDY  
COMMON SENSE AND JUSTIFIED IN A  
LIFE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS,  
FIRST TAUGHT ME  
THE REASONABLENESS OF PRAYER.



## FROM THE COMMUNICATION OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE BEDELL LECTURESHIP.

June 20, 1880.

GENTLEMEN: We have consecrated and set apart for the service of God the sum of five thousand dollars, to be devoted to the establishment of a lecture or lectures in the Institutions at Gambier on the Evidences of Natural and Revealed Religion, or the Relations of Science and Religion.

We ask permission of the Trustees to establish the lecture immediately, with the following provisions:

The lecture or lectures shall be delivered biennially on Founders' Day (if such a day shall be established) or other appropriate time. During our lifetime, or the lifetime of either of us, the nomination of the lectureship shall rest with us.

The interest for two years on the fund, less the sum necessary to pay for the publication, shall be paid to the Lecturer.

The Lecturer shall also have one half of the net profits of the publication during the first two years after the date of publication. All other profits shall be the profits of the Board, and shall be added to the capital of the lectureship.

We express our preference that the lecture or lectures shall be delivered in the Church of the Holy Spirit, if such building be in existence; and shall be delivered in the presence of all the members of the Institutions under the authority of the Board.

We ask that the day on which the lecture, or the first of each series of lectures, shall be delivered shall be a holiday.

We wish that the nomination to this lectureship shall be restricted by no other consideration than the ability of the appointee to discharge the duty to the highest glory of God in the completest presentation of the subject.

We desire that the lectures shall be published in uniform shape and that a copy of each shall be placed in the libraries of Bexley Hall, Kenyon College, and of the Philomathean and Nu Kappa Pi Society.

Asking the favorable consideration of the Trustees,

We remain, with respect,

G. T. BEDELL,

JULIA BEDELL.

To the Trustees of the Theological Seminary of the  
Diocese of Ohio and Kenyon College.

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#### LIST OF PREVIOUS LECTURES ON THE BEDELL FOUNDATION.

1881. "THE WORLD'S WITNESS TO CHRIST," by the Rt. Rev. John Williams, D.D., etc., Bishop of Connecticut.

1883. "REVEALED RELIGION IN RELATION TO THE MORAL BEING OF GOD," by the Rt. Rev. Henry Cotterill, D.D., etc., Bishop of Edinburgh.

1885. "THE WORLD AND THE LOGOS," by the Rt. Rev. Hugh Miller Thompson, D.D., etc., Bishop of Mississippi.

1887. "THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF EVOLUTION," by the Rev. James McCosh, D.D., etc., President of Princeton College.

1889. "THE HISTORICAL CHRIST THE MORAL POWER OF HISTORY," by the Rev. David H. Greer, D.D., etc., Rector of St. Bartholomew's Church, New York.

1891. "HOLY WRIT AND MODERN THOUGHT," by the Rt. Rev. Arthur Cleveland Coxe, D.D., etc., Bishop of Western New York.

1893. "THE WITNESS OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH TO PURE CHRISTIANITY," by the Rt. Rev. William A. Leonard, D.D., etc., Bishop of Ohio.

## PREFACE.

THESE lectures were not written when delivered; and it has not been easy, in the midst of an otherwise busy and active life, to find time to fill out the notes for publication. This must account for the lateness of their issue in book form—a delay which the writer greatly regrets.

They were prepared with reference to the special audience of students to which they were originally addressed rather than with an eye to the reading public; and it has consequently been thought best in writing to preserve the informal and direct style of address of the platform. They are lectures, too, not sermons. The merely hortatory has been avoided as far as possible.

They were delivered as two lectures, in accordance with the usual custom; but in pub-

lishing, the natural division of the subject under an introduction and three heads has been followed.

The writer wishes to acknowledge his obligations to all the works named below, whether expressly quoted or not, and especially to Professor Le Conte's "Religion and Science," to which he has been largely indebted throughout.

B. V.

## WORKS REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT.

"Some Elements of Religion," by the Rev. H. P. Liddon, D.D., etc., Canon of St. Paul's, London (New York, Scribner & Armstrong, 1872).

"Religion and Science," by Professor Joseph Le Conte (New York, Appleton & Co., 1874).

"The Relations of Religion and Science," by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Temple, Bishop of Exeter (New York, Macmillan & Co., 1884).

"Thoughts on Religion," by George John Romanes (Chicago, Open Court Publishing Company, 1895).

"Christian Truth and Modern Opinion" a Symposium (New York, T. Whittaker, 1874).

"Old Faith and New Facts," by the Rev. William W. Kinsley (New York, Appleton, 1896).

"The Power of Prayer," by the Rev. S. Irenæus Prime, D.D. (New York, Scribners, 1889).

"Prayer and its Answer," by the Rev. S. Irenæus Prime, D.D. (New York, Scribners, 1889).

"The Theory of Prayer," by the Rev. W. H. Karlake (London, S. P. C. K.).

"Prayer and Recent Difficulties about It," Boyle Lectures, 1873, by Archdeacon Hessey (London, S. P. C. K.).

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“Aids to Prayer,” by the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher (New York, Randolph & Co.).

“The Idea of God,” by John Fiske (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1886).

“The Destiny of Man,” by the same author.

“Prayer for the Sick,” articles in “Contemporary Review,” vol. xx., pp. 406, 430, 760 (1872).



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“ Lord, what a change within us one short hour  
Spent in Thy presence will prevail to make!  
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take,  
What parched grounds refresh as with a shower!  
We kneel, and all around us seems to lower;  
We rise, and all the distant and the near  
Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear.  
We kneel how weak! We rise how full of power!  
Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong,  
Or others—that we are not always strong;  
That we are ever overborne with care;  
That we should ever weak or heartless be,  
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,  
And joy and strength and courage are with Thee ? ”

THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER.

# THE REASONABLENESS OF PRAYER.

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## INTRODUCTION.

“What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?”—Job xxi. 15.

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”—St. James v. 16.

THESE two texts strike the key-notes of these lectures. They suggest at once two kinds of difficulties connected with prayer, one which belongs to the philosophy of religion in general, the other to the practice of prayer in particular.

(1) It is the custom of certain Christian writers of our own day to speak of other periods of Christian history as “ages of faith”—as if this in which we live were, by necessary implication, an age of no faith altogether. The

distinction is unfair. The fact is that there is no more disbelief in our day than in other days. The real peculiarity of our own day is the kind of disbelief which prevails.

The skepticism of other days has been mainly speculative. It based itself on an *a priori* philosophy of things. Not merely did it admit the idea and existence of the spiritual; its chief concern was with the spiritual essence of things. As to God, it regarded Him as the one thing which really is; as to man, it rightly considered him as only existing by God; as to matter, it was strongly disposed to deny the reality of this altogether.

The skepticism of our own day is of a very different kind; it follows very different mental processes; it bases itself on a philosophy not of pure thought, but of natural facts, of physical appearances and experiences. It is intensely critical in certain directions (as in religion and history), but it is even more materialistic; that is to say, it now concerns itself chiefly with the realities of that very world of matter which, it was once claimed, has no



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real existence. Its chief data are the facts, forces, and laws of the natural world; its chief code of revelation the discoveries of modern physical science. Is not the whole record a curious chapter in the history of human thinking?

But now the final tendency of such a materialistic temper is, of course, to deny altogether the existence of anything above nature—of anything, that is, which is not knowable directly by the natural senses or indirectly by physical experiment. It will not recognize or use other faculties which we possess for knowing the supernatural. It simply insists that, by reasoning from such means and data as it will use, it does not know and cannot know of any such thing as the supernatural. For it, such things as spiritual being or spiritual forces have no existence. As a consequence, the being of God, the nature of God, and the power of God are all practically denied. Such a philosophy becomes almost necessarily either atheistic, pantheistic, or necessitarian. For, it asks, must not matter and force, which are the only things we

know, be eternally self-existent? Has not this present world of nature been evolved from indefinitely remote beginnings by processes within itself, and entirely independently of any act of creation or other kind of interference from outside? Do we not “discern in matter itself the promise and potency of all life”? What need is there of God? God is only an idea or convenient name for the sum of things—that is, for matter and force. Even if He be a person and a Creator, He is not sovereign in His own universe; He is bound hard and fast by the invariability of the laws which He has Himself imposed on nature. Any such thing as His freedom of will and action in the course of things is simply unthinkable. Special providences are an impossibility.

What, then, in this view of things, it is very naturally asked, on the other hand, becomes of religion? Are not its very foundations thereby destroyed? Has not the very Object of faith disappeared, and must not all the forms and practices of religion go with it? In such a light, is not “the spirit of prayer itself irrational

and absurd, the act of prayer a superstition, and the posture of prayer therefore debasing"?<sup>1</sup>

We can easily see what effect such reasoning must have on certain classes of minds. The out-and-out materialist feels bound to make light of prayer; the worldling is only too glad to get rid, as he thinks, of the duty of prayer; the unreflecting Christian is disturbed and discouraged and has no longer any heart for prayer. All join, more or less, in the sentiment of "the wicked" as set forth by Job: "What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?"

(2) To this question the Christian faith gives a very direct answer. It turns to its New Testament and reads, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."<sup>2</sup> That is a strong declaration. But turn now to the original Greek and see how much stronger it is there:<sup>3</sup> "The fervent prayer of a righteous man [we read now] prevaieth mightily in its

<sup>1</sup> Le Conte's "Religion and Science," p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> St. James v. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Edition of Westcott and Hort. πολλὴ ἰσχὺν δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη.

working"—literally, "in its energizing," its power to effect results. One might think from this that prayer is itself really one of the great forces of the universe; yes, that it is even able to set in motion, perhaps, all the mightiest forces of the universe.

But now, right here—right in the face of such a faith—is where the practical difficulties come in. For at once the question arises, Do you really believe that statement? Do you really believe that prayer has such power to prevail with God? You pray; you pray regularly, and often fervently, in just such faith. But are there not in your life times of spiritual depression and disappointment when you ask yourself almost aloud, "Oh, what is the use of my praying, after all? *How* can God *hear* prayer? If He can hear, how can He *answer* prayer? And if He can hear and answer, *why* does He *not* answer *my* prayers?" Unless your experience is different from that of most Christians, such doubts will come; and it is no sin that they come. They are a part of the infirmity of faith or of necessary temptation.

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The sin would be in yielding to such doubts and letting them become denials. The duty is to try to find reasonable answers to them. For faith is not unreasonable. It may believe that which is above or beyond reason, but never anything which is contrary to reason. And the very purpose of these lectures is to show that prayer is not unreasonable.

Yet do not misunderstand my use of that word "reasonable" here, nor the kind of arguments which I shall use hereafter. I do not mean to suggest that all the mysteries connected with prayer can be solved by the reason alone; far from it. You can learn more of God and of the mysteries of His kingdom through your conscience, your heart, and a life of actual obedience to His will than you can ever learn by your reason alone. Still, God has given you reason, and given it to be used about all His works. Even in the matter of religion He has commanded, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy *mind*." As far as reason will carry you, then, in such matters, let it do so. If it cannot demonstrate here, it can at least

illustrate; and where reason ends, there the region of faith begins. Is not this practically what St. Paul means when he says to the Corinthians, in speaking of the mysteries of the Lord's Supper, "I speak as to wise men [i.e., thinking men]; judge ye what I say"?<sup>1</sup> In other words, let us believe, but let us also try to understand.

Still less need we be afraid to appeal, in this connection, to the teachings of natural science. "Science," says Le Conte,<sup>2</sup> "can never touch the grounds of a true religion; its whole function is to give more rational ground to our religious belief." "The progress of science," said Henry Ward Beecher, "lays a surer foundation for a belief in God's active interference in human affairs than has existed without it. When maturer fruits of investigation shall be had, there can be no doubt that science itself will establish our faith in prayer, in miracles, and in special providences."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, let me make this neces-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. x. 15.

<sup>2</sup> "Religion and Science," p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> "Aids to Prayer," p. 62.

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sary reservation: we cannot give any absolute natural proof of the proposition that God answers prayer, especially in the affairs of this world. Being properly a truth of the world supernatural, only the testimony of God Himself in revelation can be final proof of the fact. But if we can by reasoning about them, even on the principles of natural science, dispose of most, if not all, of the difficulties connected with faith in prayer, we shall then be in a position to accept the assurances of God's Word upon the subject, and especially as confirmed by our own spiritual experience and that of all other men who have prayed.

Let us enter upon the discussion of our subject, then, with all faith and humility, but with the confidence, also, that by thinking about it we shall only strengthen that faith and deepen that humility. And, further, in order to simplify the whole matter, let us deal with just such practical questions or difficulties as those already suggested.





## LECTURE I.

### HOW CAN GOD HEAR PRAYER?

How, then, we ask, to start with,—*How can God hear prayer?*

Such a question throws us back instantly for our answer on the very foundations of faith. We have to remind ourselves at once who and what kind of being He is about whom we are asking such questions.

I. We have to recollect, in the first place, that He is *God*. I shall not stop here to try to prove that there is a God. I do not need to. I am not arguing now with atheists. I am speaking admittedly to those who do believe in God and in prayer, and who are only seeking to understand where they already believe. I therefore assume the existence of God. This

is just what the Bible itself does; it takes God's existence for granted, in its very opening sentence. But why? Because all men do practically believe in God; because it is the most natural of all things for them to do so; because they have to force themselves not to believe in Him. For not merely is a belief in God not unreasonable, it is the very ground and first necessity of reason itself. Without it reason has neither a starting-place nor an end—whatever names reason itself may choose to give to these. Just because, then, such a belief is “so universal, so necessary, and so intuitive in men, it is more certain than anything can be made by mere process of reasoning. It lies back of all proof and so itself needs none.”<sup>1</sup>

II. Next, we have to recollect what kind of a being God is. He is a Person; He is the Supreme Being of all this vast universe; its Creator and First Cause, from whom all forces in it take their rise.

These truths are taught us by revelation, but they are also confirmed by reason. Reason can

<sup>1</sup> Le Conte, p. 12.

never be satisfied with the idea of God as a mere impersonal, unthinking, unfeeling life-force in the world. Reason looks at the world of nature and sees everywhere evidence of *intelligent* contrivance and design. She sees it in innumerable things which serve both for use and for beauty, from the marvelous human eye or the lovely flower at our feet to the light-giving, life-sustaining sun above our heads or the glorious harmonies of order throughout a universe. Indeed, we have the express admission of the very highest modern authorities both in theology and in science—of men like the Rev. Dr. Martineau and Professor Carpenter—that “unless it takes more mental faculty to construe [that is, to interpret] a universe than to cause it, to read the book of nature than to write it, we must more than ever look upon its sublime face as the appeal of Thought to thought.”<sup>1</sup>

So with your human heart. If it is to accept the fact of a God at all, it demands a God who is a living person, one whom it can know and

<sup>1</sup> Professor William B. Carpenter, “On Mind and Will in Nature,” “Contemporary Review,” 1872, vol. xx., p. 762.

with whom it can come into living communion ; one who is the ideal and more of all that is highest and best in men themselves ; one whom it can reverence and love as well as worship and obey ; one with whom it can find grace to help in every hour of need. The best of men, the more they come to think of themselves and of God at all, always find that they want such a God. And these intuitions of the human heart, when thus strong and universal, are, in such a department of truth, as trustworthy and convincing as the clearest conclusions of the human reason.

But how can you think of such divine intelligence and character except as belonging to a person ; to a person, too, who is self-existent, who is outside nature as well as in it, and also before it and after it ; hence one who is supreme, also, over His own creation, both in will and in power ?

III. More than that : God is, according to our faith, not merely a person ; He is also " our Father " in a sense infinitely more real than our earthly parent is. And if He be such a Father,

*will* He not hear the cry of His human children?

(1) You know how beautifully and tenderly this truth of God's Fatherhood has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. That is reason sufficient for believing it. But did you think that there are no other reasons for believing it?

(2) Martineau's thought is just as true in reverse: the human mind, which can understand and follow the workings of the divine mind in nature, must share the qualities of that mind. We trace human lineage by such resemblances; why not a divine Fatherhood and sonship?

(3) God's moral relationship to man is no less apparent. See, for instance, how it becomes probable on grounds of the purest reason. I quote from an admirable passage in a little tract by the Rev. W. W. Newton, D.D., entitled "Why I am a Christian" (p. 22): "Not long ago," he says, "a young college student was talking about the difficulties he experienced in believing in the Christian's God. 'I can believe,' he said, 'in a God as the final law which rules all things, but I cannot believe

that this God is a person.' To which it was replied, ' You are but three steps removed from the personal God of the Christian faith. . . . If this law which you are willing to call God rules all things, it must rule men; if it rules men, it must rule that which is highest in men. Now the highest in man is his moral sense. If, therefore, this final law called God rules the moral sense, it must itself be moral; if it be a moral law which rules all things it must have a character; if law has a moral character, it must imply personality; and if personality is admitted, then the old Bible doctrine of the Fatherhood of God becomes verified.' "

(4) Physical science itself, in its most recent teachings, goes far to verify the same truth. It, too, like the Scriptures, points to man as "nature's crown, the last act of creation," or at least "the last and highest term of evolution." It, too, shows that there has been a long and elaborate preparation of the earth through all its history, inanimate and animate, for the coming of man. But why? What special importance thus attaches itself to man? What is it in

a human being which thus outweighs in value ten thousand worlds of lower sentient life which have come and gone to make room for him? Does not this scientific fact harmonize perfectly with the scriptural explanation that God was about to "make man in His own image"—"in the likeness of God"? Was it not that he was about to appear who alone of all earthly creatures was to become the immortal child of God? For the whole significance of man's present place in nature, according to this teaching of science, does not end with this life. "According to Darwinism," says Professor John Fiske, "the creation of man is still the goal toward which nature tended from the beginning. Not the production of any higher creature, but the perfecting of humanity, is to be the glorious consummation of nature's long and tedious work. Thus we suddenly arrive at the conclusion that man seems now, much more clearly than ever, the chief among God's creatures. . . . This psychical development of man is destined to go on in the future as it has gone on in the past. The creative energy which has been at work

through the bygone ages of eternity is not going to become quiescent to-morrow. . . . From the first dawning of life we see all things working together toward one mighty goal, the evolution of the most exalted spiritual qualities of humanity. . . . To deny the everlasting persistence of the spiritual element in man is to rob the whole process of its meaning. . . . For my own part, therefore," he says, "I believe in the immortality of the soul as a supreme act of faith in the reasonableness of God's work."<sup>1</sup> And what is the meaning of such a destiny of man, I ask, if it be not that he is the child of Him who decreed it?

(5) But even if God is such a Father, will He leave the care of a universe to concern Himself with the needs and prayers of individual men? Can we reasonably expect Him to do so? Scripture teaches us that God's power and love are no less plain in His care for the greatest things than for the smallest. He has set the sun and moon and stars in their places, each with a purpose and work of its own; yet He

<sup>1</sup> "Destiny of Man," pp. 31, 72, 113, 116.



counts the very hairs of our heads and notes even a dying sparrow. But what does physical science say on this point? True, when it points us to the vastness of creation and to the general provision for the good of the whole, the individual creature does seem to be lost sight of. But does not the same science also point us to other facts and another conclusion? Use your microscope as well as your telescope and see the proofs of God's infinite painstaking. See how carefully and beautifully the eye or wing of the tiniest insect is fashioned; it is no less perfectly adapted to its purpose than the order of a planetary system. Shall all this care be taken for mere creatures of a day, and man—"nature's crown," God's own child, made in His image—"he for whose abode the earth was prepared and the centuries had been waiting"—he whom God has endowed with all divine gifts of conscious intelligence, moral discernment, and freedom of will—will God give no heed to him when he prays? Evolution itself, in the last analysis, is chiefly concerned not with the masses of living creatures, but with the indi-

vidual; and in its crowning work in man is chiefly concerned with the development of those very personal traits of the individual which fit him for likeness and companionship with God. "If God," said Canon Liddon,<sup>1</sup> "is not supposed to be mainly interested in vast accumulations of senseless matter, if there be in the estimate of a moral being other and worthier measures of greatness, . . . then we need not acquiesce in any depreciatory estimate of man's claims upon the ear of God."

(6) Again, prayer is an instinct, the cry of dependence. We mark it everywhere in nature, from the open mouths of the young birds in their nests or the inarticulate cry of the babe in arms, to the loftiest aspirations and longings of the human soul. "The cry of the young raven brings its food from afar; . . . for that cry has power to move the emotions and muscles of the parent bird and to overcome its own selfish appetite. The bleat of the lamb not only brings its dam to its side, but causes the secretion of milk in her udder."<sup>2</sup> Will the God of nature,

<sup>1</sup> "Elements," etc., p. 194.      <sup>2</sup> Sir James Dawson.

whom we believe to be also the Father of spirits, will He give to every other living thing the satisfaction its nature craves,—to every plant and animal its proper soil and climate and food,—and will He not hear His human children when they cry for help?

And so, in any case, whatever the theoretical difficulties may be, we must believe, if we believe in God and ourselves at all, that He who has sent forth the Spirit of a Son into our hearts, whereby we cry, “ Our Father,” surely *will* hear our prayers.

IV. But still the question presses, *How can* God hear prayer? And here we must recollect that our Father is (a) Spirit and (the) universal Spirit.

(1) Half the practical difficulties connected with prayer come from forgetting this truth. We indulge in such mistaken, unworthy ideas about God. We so often think of Him as if He were such an one as ourselves; as if He were a being limited in presence and power, and localized somewhere in space, even in heaven, but nevertheless separated from us by an infinite distance and difference of interest. Is it any

wonder that, with such thoughts about God, we are led to question the power of prayer? For how, we think, shall we overcome those vast distances between us and Him by our mere human voice or longings? How shall we establish communication with such a hopelessly absent and preoccupied God? Why, a poor Pariah in the jungles of India might more reasonably expect to speak directly into the ear of his empress in England! Yet even that, in these days, would not be impossible. True, certain expressions in Scripture do seem to warrant such ideas about God. Solomon prayed, "Hear Thou in heaven, O God, Thy dwelling-place;" and Jesus Himself taught us to pray, "Our Father, which art in heaven." In both these instances the language is popular and the idea intended to draw a special distinction—in the one case from an earthly dwelling-place, and in the other from an earthly parent. But when Scripture comes to speak definitively on such a subject it leaves no room for mistake. God, said Jesus on another occasion, God is not to be thought of as if He could be approached or worshiped in

any one place alone: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."<sup>1</sup> God, said St. Paul, too, is not far off from any one of us (or, as Faber so beautifully puts it, "God is never so far off as even to be *near*"): "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being."<sup>2</sup> So intimate is the presence of His Spirit with our spirits that "the very thoughts and intents of our hearts" are all known unto Him.

Here is the true idea of God and of our relations to Him. And this being so, do we not begin to see how it is that God *can* speak to us and *can* hear us when we speak to Him?

(2) Perhaps, though, while you do not deny the fact, you will say that any such intimate association of God's Spirit with our spirits is utterly unthinkable by you. You do not understand *how* it can be—*how* God, the universal Spirit, can dwell in you, and you at the same time dwell in Him. You never can understand this perfectly, but you can get perhaps some idea of the fact.

<sup>1</sup> St. John iv. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Acts xvii. 28.

(a) Consider the analogy of physical forces. You remember that homely instance of identical presence, the iron in the fire and the fire in the iron. Or take a wider range: think of that which is, for us, practically a universal substance, the atmosphere. It envelops the earth to a distance of many miles in all directions, and yet penetrates, through the lungs and blood, every smallest fiber of your body. You dwell in it, and it dwells in you. How your very physical life depends upon it! You could not breathe without it; you could not speak a single word or hear one without it. Again, back of the atmosphere, if the assumption of physical science be correct, lies another substance called the ether—far more subtle and widely diffused; filling all the otherwise empty spaces of the universe; bringing you the light of the sun and moon and stars; enabling that light to come to you through that solid pane of glass, or the heat of that stove to come to you through its solid sides of iron. Still another practically universal substance or force you know by the name of electricity. You find it everywhere present in this earthly dwell-

ing-place of ours, from the fur of the cat which lies at your feet to the aurora borealis above your head or the great magnetic current which encircles the globe. You dwell in it; you are perfectly conscious physically of any disturbance in the electrical conditions of the atmosphere. It dwells in you; shake hands with some one on a clear, frosty midwinter morning and you quickly learn the fact. How close and vital that connection is with our physical life and happiness we are beginning to realize to-day as never before. You remember that famous fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, called "The Creation of Adam." The hand of God seems stretching out from a cloud, touching the tip of Adam's forefinger with the tip of His own forefinger, animating Adam's as yet lifeless form with the electric spark of life. It is a wonderfully significant picture. And if your very physical being is thus enwrapped and penetrated by physical substances or forces which are practically universal, do you not find a hint here of what is possible, or at least conceivable, in your spiritual life?



(b) Or look at the fact of your own personal presence or influence. See its character and range. It is not limited by your mere bodily presence or powers. You are perfectly conscious that you yourself, your spirit, is something separate from and superior to them. How strange and yet how real is that power we have of making ourselves felt by others, not only across a room, but across a continent! Our thoughts, our purposes, our sympathies, our example, go out from us in all directions, and may become almost endless influences over other men for good or for evil. A whole civilized world to the end of time, perhaps, may feel the personal influence of one great soul. There is hardly an earthly or, for that matter, a heavenly limit to the effect of our human spirits in and upon one another.

Is the thought of a personal, universal, indwelling, all-influencing divine Spirit, then, any less conceivable or reasonable? If all life in us is only a gift of the life divine; if all reason in us is only a spark of the light divine; if affection in us is only an impulse of the love



divine, and conscience an echo of the voice divine, and our free will a stirring of the power divine—if we can think and say all this, as we are accustomed to, why should it seem impossible to think or absurd to say that God actually dwells in us and we in Him? For remember that we are not to think of God only as “mere hugeness, filling all space with only a divided life and energy, as our bodies occupy only a portion of space, but as dwelling with His complete and undivided life and energy everywhere and at once,”<sup>1</sup> in the soul of each one of us as truly as on the throne of the universe.

(3) And yet what do we mean by that word “spirit”? Does it convey any distinct idea to our minds? What proof is there that there is any such thing as “spirit” in God or in us? Just the same kind of proof as we have that there is such a thing as “matter.” We can define matter by its phenomena—by what we know of it through our senses; but what it really is in its very essence no one knows. So spirit may be defined as something which

<sup>1</sup> Le Conte, p. 86.

lies back of phenomena—"something which thinks and feels, and works through matter;" but what it is in its very essence neither does any one know. But I ask you to notice that our belief nevertheless in its existence rests on just as sure a basis and on just the same kind of basis as our belief in the existence of matter. One is the direct revelation of our senses, the other the direct revelation of our consciousness. Both are immediate, intuitive, universal; both are equally certain and independent of proof; both are starting-points of reason—matter perceived, spirit perceiving. In short, without belief in spirit, just as without belief in matter, there could be neither philosophy nor science. Even science itself is being forced to admit that in these days.<sup>1</sup> So that when we come, with the Scriptures, to speak of God as Spirit, we are justified in saying that nature itself reveals such a God—a God who "thinks and feels and works everywhere around us and within us, and yet is not seen by us." And so, when we come to speak of ourselves as

<sup>1</sup> See Romanes's "Thoughts on Religion," *passim*.

spirits, it is because we too are able to think and feel and will and work, and even, as we believe, to hold communion with that Father of spirits in prayer.

(a) If you still ask how, apart from such reasoning, you are to realize this world of spirit, the simple answer is, just as you realize the world of matter—by living and working in it. Shut yourself up in a room and you can reason yourself, just as many a man has done before you, into the idea that there is no such thing as the external world; that what you call such is only “the delusive image of certain interior states of your own mind.” But open your door, go out into that world itself, go your usual round in it, or strike your toe against some good-sized stone, and your faith in the reality of material things instantly returns. So with regard to the spirit-world. You know that there is such a thing not merely by reasoning about it, but by living, loving, praying, and working in it. God and the soul require no further proof.

(b) One other question ought to be answered here: How does spirit in man differ from life in

all other living things? Does not a dog think and feel and will? May not "spirit" in man, then, be no more than just animal life, the mere product of organization or the result of transformed physical and chemical forces? Our one reassurance in the face of such doubts is in appeal to the testimony of our own consciousness. We *know* that we are something more and better than mere animals, however we came to be so. We *know* that there is something in us which is not in them; something which does want and does find satisfaction in things moral, spiritual, divine. Above all, that life in us which we call "spiritual" has independence in a peculiar sense. We are free in the region of thought and in the realm of physical and moral law as mere animals are not. We can consciously control and direct the forces of nature even while we submit to them; we have liberty in our moral judgment and choice; we are free to will and act in all things, and, best of all, this thing in us which we call "spirit" recognizes its own freedom and rejoices in it; it knows itself. No research into nature, no philosophy

of men, has ever been able to bridge this enormous chasm and identify spiritual life with that which is merely animal. That conscious freedom of ours is a gift from above, not a development from below. Its real greatness and true source have been strikingly suggested in this way: if all life in the world is thinkable as being only the outworkings of the one divine Spirit, why is not the spirit of man thinkable as this same divine Spirit "*individuated* into a self-conscious person"? We think of our sun throwing off its planets, all parts of the parent sun, all bound back to it by the invisible spell of gravity, yet each having a separate existence and form of its own. May we not think of our spirits as standing in some such relation to the great Father of spirits, only with this enormous difference: we are self-conscious, with a mind and will of our own, having the perilous power of absolute moral independence of God if we will; power to break the bond of religion which "binds" us "back" in faith and loving obedience to Him, and, like a flying meteor or a rebellious Satan, go hurtling off headlong to ever-

lasting destruction? And, on the other hand, may we not also think most worthily of our spirits—these same “self-conscious emanations of Deity”—as struggling up in their very freedom (especially by prayer) to recognize their own source in God; and so finally reaching their last term of aspiration and evolution in a perfect reunion with Him; not reabsorbed into Him in a death-like Nirvana, but still holding conscious, loving, active, filial, free, and most blessed communion with Him in that highest liberty which is always under law?<sup>1</sup>

(4) And so, finally, as to who and what this God is to whom we would pray, and what we are who would pray to Him; it is of reason as well as of faith that He is a personal God, that He is our Father, and that He is a universal Spirit dwelling in us, and we finite spirits dwelling in Him. We have seen that it is not only reasonable to believe that God can and will speak to us, but also that He can and will hear us when we speak to Him. But such a possibil-

<sup>1</sup> For the suggestion of these last three paragraphs, see Le Conte, pp. 63, 272-277.

ity is more than a matter of mere guesses or even of reason. Here in this holy book which we call the Word of God is a record of the convictions of mankind from the beginning that God has so spoken to them in the inner man and has heard them when they have so spoken to Him. We have a reasonable right to trust that record as we do the like witness of our own experience. We must do it if we would pray effectively. We must ask "in faith, nothing wavering: for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord."<sup>1</sup> "He that cometh to God must [first of all] believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> St. James i. 6, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. xi. 6.

## LECTURE II.

### HOW CAN GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

BUT now, granting that there is a God, and that He both can and will hear prayer, still, *how can God answer prayer?*

I. We ask Him, for instance, for such *material* things as food and clothing, for healing in sickness and protection in danger, for fair weather and good crops, for national prosperity and success in war. *How* can God answer prayer for *such* things? *How* does He do it? Is He not a Spirit? Can we reasonably expect Him to concern Himself with such material things? Is it a proper purpose of prayer to try to induce Him to do so?

(1) In the first place, we should remind ourselves just here that, while Christianity teaches



a very positive doctrine of providence, it also teaches a very distinct kind of prayer in connection with it. Jesus teaches us that God cares for our bodies as truly as for our souls, that He will feed us as surely as He does the birds, and clothe us as certainly as He does the flowers. Indeed, He says that our heavenly Father knows that we have need of all these things before we ask Him. He intimates that God has made, as in the sunlight and the rain, a fixed provision for the bodily needs of all mankind, and this whether they are good or evil, whether they pray to Him or not. Therefore, even while He teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," Jesus also says to us, "Have no anxiety about such things. Seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." In other words, the kind of prayer which we ought to offer about such things is not so much one of petition—that is, of anxious asking—as one of perfect trust, of entire self-committal in all our earthly interests to God's loving care. There is no wrong, of course, in

our continuing to ask even where we do fully trust. We ought, for instance, to ask for God's blessing on all our own efforts for self-support. Indeed, there are many excellent and beautiful reasons in our relations to God as a Father which justify such continued asking, so long as it is always in the spirit which our Lord suggests.

(2) But it may be objected here : Even if it be consistent with the infinite goodness of God for us to continue to ask where we believe that He has already provided, still, how are we to reconcile the thought of answered prayer with that of the divine foreordination? If all things are eternally foreseen and foreordered by God, what room is left here for the operation of prayer? My getting what I need in body and soul must either have been arranged for by God from all eternity, *or* it is dependent on my prayers; it cannot be both. Now we have to admit, of course, that the whole subject at this point is beyond the full grasp of our minds. We cannot dispose of all the difficulties connected with it; but we can do this: we can claim all the facts on both sides without demanding an absolutely

satisfactory agreement in them, and then leave their final reconciliation to Him who has taught us to pray. We do believe, for instance, that God is omniscient and foresees and foreorders all things; but we also know from our own consciousness, as certainly as we know anything, that we human beings are absolutely free to will and act as we choose. So with God's sovereignty and answers to our prayers. We do not see how such answers can be reconciled in thought with the divine foresight and foreordination; but we are also sure, so far as our requests for spiritual help are concerned, that our prayers are answered. In other words, however necessary absolute foreordination by God may seem in the abstract, practically there is a limit to it. "The opinion of necessity," says Bishop Butler, "considered as practical is false." So there is but one way left us of thinking here of the operation of prayer, and that is this: the God who encourages prayer must somehow have made allowance for it. Even so high an authority as Canon Liddon takes this view of the matter. "Prayer," he says, "is only a foreseen

action which, together with its results, is embraced in the eternal predestination of God. . . . God works out His plans not merely in us, but by us." <sup>1</sup>

(3) But now comes an objector from another standpoint and says: "Over and above the difficulties in the nature of God Himself there are other difficulties connected with His very works in the world of nature. This world of nature is a world of law. All things go on in the natural universe from the beginning in a perfect sequence of cause and effect. This natural order of things is fixed and invariable. God could not interfere with it to answer your prayers for material blessings without violating the laws which He has Himself imposed on nature and so causing endless confusion and ruin." As if God had somehow created the world like a great clock, and set it a-going, and were now afraid to touch it, lest, like some meddlesome boy, He should get His fingers into the works and stop it.

(a) But now notice that these "laws" of nature are not such in any sense which makes

<sup>1</sup> "Elements," etc., p. 193.

them necessarily independent of God. There is nothing to show that they have any real existence in themselves. They are merely convenient formulæ for us; that is to say, they are our way of speaking of certain of God's ways of thinking and working in the natural world. Our observation of these ways, even if our experience be so far uniform, is confessedly limited. How do we know that God has not at the same time other ways of thinking and working? At any rate, what right have we to assume that God's own laws are laws of bondage to Him and not rather laws of freedom? Our own ideas of moral self-control, our own experience of civil self-government, ought to teach us better.

(*b*) But, it may be said, is not God in His own nature an unchangeable God; and does not that fact alone imply the invariability of His laws? Yes, so far as His moral nature is concerned; He cannot be just to-day and unjust to-morrow. But this does not imply that He is not free in His executive nature; that is, free to will and act in the natural world. At least, it cannot be proved that He is not so free.

(c) And so with regard to the so-called "forces" of nature, we have no more right to say that they are beyond the control of God for special purposes than the laws according to which they work. They certainly are not if they are the creations of God Himself, much less if God Himself is also in them and working through them.

They are not even beyond the control of human will and skill. For consider what men have done and are doing all the time by the help of that very science which sometimes seems disposed to deny to God Himself the same power. You never lift your arm to throw a stone into the air; you never drink a glass of water which has been forced uphill, perhaps, to your very door; you never use a telegraph or telephone, or ride on a steam-car, or use any one of the thousands of articles manufactured by machinery, that you may not see how men are all the time taking the forces of nature, using them, controlling them, adapting them to their own ideas and ends, and doing it with the greatest ease. Nor are these triumphs

of man limited only to the control of natural facts and forces as he finds them; he can even improve on nature's own work. See how he does it, for instance, in the fields of agriculture, floriculture, and stock-breeding. "There are respects," wrote Henry Ward Beecher, "in which natural laws are beyond human interference and control. Such are the great laws which bind the stellar universe together. . . . But there is another class of laws meant to minister directly to human life. . . . Of these I affirm," he says, "that they do not perform their [perfect] function until they are controlled and directed by human mind and will. Look at nature's fruits. There is but a beginning in natural fruits, and they never, when left to nature alone, reach beyond that point. When a man finds a crab-apple in the woods he would not willingly find it more than once; yet, brought to his own orchard, it becomes a fine fruit. Did nature make the pippin? Nature had been trying for years and never got beyond the crab-apple. . . . Nature can make iron, but she never made a sword; she never made a jack-



knife, a steam-engine, a knife and fork—nothing but cold, dead iron.”<sup>1</sup> And yet notice that in all these human manipulations of the forces of nature there is no “violation” of the laws of nature. There is often the suspension of the operation of one law by introducing the more forceful operation of another, there are combinations and adjustments of forces, but no violation of law. All forces of nature are used exactly in accordance with the laws under which they were meant to operate. Indeed, the success of human skill is exactly proportioned to the extent to which the laws of nature are obeyed.

Thus we come to realize that there has at length been introduced into the world, in *the human will*, an entirely *new* and *independent force*; a force which has to be taken into consideration in the question of what is possible or impossible in the operation of other forces in the natural world. Indeed, not only is will power the only really independent force of which it is possible to conceive, but so unique is it in the

<sup>1</sup> “Aids to Prayer,” pp. 63-67.



history of the universe that its existence in man becomes proof positive that God has already interfered with the previously established course of things. And shall we, in the face of such a fact, deny the possibility in God Himself of such a reserve force of will power as will enable Him still further, at His own pleasure or on the strength of our prayers, to make new dispositions in the natural course of things?

(*d*) Consider here, again, the bearing of that doctrine of modern physical science called "the correlation of forces." It is this: all the facts of the natural universe are, in the last analysis, reducible to two, viz., matter and force. In other words, all natural "forces"—or what we are accustomed to speak of as such (e.g., light, heat, gravity, electricity)—are really not so many separate forces, but simply separate forms of working of one great universal fact of force. What a startling conclusion! What a strikingly fresh witness by science itself to the unity of purpose, and so the unity of origin, of all things in nature! For what, now, we ask, *is* this universal force? What is it in any one

of its particular forms? What is light or heat or gravity or electricity? Do you know? Does any one know? What, then, if this universal fact of force be a living will, the living will of the one universal Spirit, God Himself, going forth into action? Is it not so that Scripture itself teaches us to think of the initial entrance of force into the world? Is it not God's "Spirit" which is represented as moving "in the beginning" on the face of chaos and giving it its first impulse toward order? Was it not His will, expressing itself in His word, which brought about creation? Did He not simply say, "Let there be light," and there was light? Did not Jesus say, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work"? And did not St. John declare that "without the Word was not anything made that was made"?

In other words, in view of what men themselves are doing, is this thought of the living God Himself working in and through all natural forces an unreasonable one? And shall we deny to His supreme will the same safe and independent control of those forces, even in answer to

prayer, as we ourselves exercise under the impulse of our own desires and wills?

(e) On the other hand, this is to be said, that, even granting the invariability of natural laws, the fact is in many ways only to our advantage. It is the best possible guaranty we can have of God's constant provision for all human physical needs. It is just this which makes us sure of the regular return of the seasons and of the annual harvests, that the revolving earth will continue to go on its appointed way, and the stars keep their places while we sleep. In any case, we must not expect God to interfere capriciously with the order of the universe, even to answer our prayers. I say we must not expect Him ordinarily to so interfere. Only it is absurd to say that God cannot interfere, and impossible to prove that He will not interfere for sufficient cause. What man can do God certainly can.

(4) Just here let us stop a moment now to recall the famous "prayer test," which created such excitement and discussion a few years ago. A writer in one of the English magazines

proposed to "test the physical value of prayer."<sup>1</sup> Prayer is constantly being offered, he claimed, for all sorts of material blessings—for victory in battle, for good crops, for protection of those at sea, for the recovery of the sick, etc. As a test case, he proposed that all patients of a given sort in one ward of some hospital should, for a series of years, be treated as usual and also prayed for by all who would. At the end of the given period the death-rate was to be compared with that of other years in the same class of cases which had been medically treated without prayer. It seemed to the majority of the Christian public a blasphemous proposition; but it was not that. It was not even meant to be irreverent, but it would have been irreverent to have consented to it. Indeed, the real spirit of the test depended altogether upon the point of view. Professor Tyndall, for instance, the principal advocate of the test, argued as follows: Prayer is, as a matter of fact (especially in such a case as that for the sick), put forward as a

<sup>1</sup> See the "Contemporary Review," 1872, vol. xx., pp. 205, 430, 763.

form of *physical energy*. As such, if physical science is to recognize it at all, it is subject, like all other physical factors, to physical test. He had no desire to extinguish prayer, he said, but only to confine it to what he regarded as its proper sphere. He only wanted to destroy delusions about it. He was perfectly willing to admit "the inherent reasonableness of prayer" to a God who is regarded as a "universal Father, and who, in answer to the prayers of His children, alters the current of natural phenomena." But for the purposes of science, he argued, any such conclusion as to the *physical* value of prayer must be *verified*. It must be based, like all other physical facts, "on pure science."

(a) Now I maintain that from the standpoint of physical science that was a perfectly reasonable and proper proposition, but from the standpoint of the Christian faith it seemed and was something very different. We Christians do claim physical results from prayer, but we also claim that prayer is, in itself and in its whole operation, something far more than mere phys-

ical energy. It also contains an indeterminate and indeterminable factor, a spiritual element, which is nothing less than the sovereign will of God Himself. That will is dependent on manifold conditions utterly unknown to us. Its value as a factor in prayer effects is therefore not to be measured by any merely physical test. For Christians to have consented to such a test would have been both unreasonable and unfair, to start with.

(*b*) But, more than this; the proposer of the test claimed that, according to ordinary Christian faith and practice, there are two classes of physical facts. One set of such facts, such as the movements of the heavenly bodies, the flow of the tides, the fact of actual death, is practically regarded as lying outside the range and power of prayer. Other physical facts, such as the weather, the crops, and the recovery of the sick, seem to be still regarded as legitimate objects of prayer. Yet the latter class of facts, he claimed, is steadily diminishing year after year, and diminishing, too, just in proportion to the progress of physical knowledge. To which it is

to be replied that the distinction which the writer speaks of does exist and always must exist. Where, as in the movements of the heavenly bodies or the fact of death, the divine will is for any reason (scriptural or scientific) believed to be fixed, we do not pray. Where, as in the perpetually varying conditions of sickness and the weather or war, which we cannot trace, we believe that will to be contingent, we do pray and always shall. The one state of mind is as Christian and also as reasonable as the other. Or, as Karlake well puts it: "With the fixed order of nature we do not ordinarily ask God to interfere, because we believe that we should not be asking according to His will. . . . But it is not from a moment's doubt of God's power to interfere. We believe that one day the sun *will* cease to shine and that all who are dead *will* be raised to new life. It is our conviction as to God's will, not any doubt as to His power or His willingness in itself to listen to our prayers, which sets the limit to what we ask of Him in prayer."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The Theory of Prayer," p. 31.

(c) In short, for Christians to have submitted prayer to any such test would, for them, have been irreverent as well as unfair. It would have been to degrade prayer to the level of mere incantation, and God will not "juggle." He will not satisfy mere curiosity with "signs." Jesus refused to cast Himself down from the temple pinnacle even to prove Himself to be the Son of God. Faith must be only single-minded and devout, if prayer is to be answered.

(5) As to the so-called "Christian science" and "faith-cure," these deserve only a passing reference here. One would heal by mere self-reassurance without prayer, and so is properly outside our present subject. The other would heal by prayer alone without medicine or other means, and so is squarely, as I believe, in the face of God's Word<sup>1</sup> and Christ's example.<sup>2</sup>

II. Turn now from the thought of prayer for physical blessings to that of prayer for *spiritual* blessings. How can God answer even such prayers?

Little need be said here as to the fact itself

<sup>1</sup> St. James v. 14.

<sup>2</sup> St. Mark vii. 33; St. John ix. 6, 7.



that such prayer is answered; the question just now is mainly a question of methods. We ask God, for instance, for strength to resist temptation or willingness to do and bear His will; or we ask Him for the spirit of penitence or purity or charity or patience. *How*—how does God give His Holy Spirit in answer to such prayers?

(1) Here, again, let me say frankly that with reference to many of God's ways of working in this connection we do not know anything. We cannot trace them any more than we can see the movements of the invisible air. His free Spirit works where and when and as it pleases Him, dividing His gifts to each man as He will. The chain of motives which operate "in our inner man" to bring about spiritual changes in us often seems to us to be endless. Yet if God Himself really dwells in us and we in Him, there seems no reason why all those "godly motions in holiness" of which we are conscious (even in answer to prayer) should not proceed directly from that indwelling Spirit.

(2) But it has pleased God to tell us that He also works upon us indirectly, by means, to pro-

duce the same results. Sometimes He does it by special means. He impresses us spiritually by striking providences, by the personal examples of others, by what we call the merest incidents of daily life,—a chance word, the ringing of a church bell, the passing of a hearse,—and this, as it often seems to us, in answer to our prayers. But better than this and far more wonderful, God promises to work in us spiritually by means that are known and regular and always accessible in a Christian land. These are “the means of grace” which He has provided in His kingdom of grace, the Church. In the prayers—both private and public—of His people, in the reading and preaching of His Word, in the sacraments and other ordinances of His house, in faithful pastoral ministrations, yes, in every act of obedience to His will, there is a whole treasury of means through which God sends spiritual blessing in answer to prayer. Here under such influences it is, more than anywhere else, that He reaches and renews and directs the “inner man” in us—our reason, our conscience, our affections, our will, which are the

immediate factors in our spiritual life. Take the case of the Holy Scriptures and their influence. Some one has recently invented an apparatus called the "photophone." A body of electric light is thrown by a strong reflector upon a sensitive plate at a distance and there reproduced in the form of sound. Light transmitted into sound! What a marvelous thing! we say. And yet is it half so marvelous as that which is taking place this moment, perhaps, as I speak to you? Think of it! An idea—pure thought—takes its rise in my brain. Almost in the same instant it too is transmuted into sound, into spoken words. These produce upon a certain material substance called the atmosphere certain vibrations, which are communicated to the sensitive nerves of your ears, and an impression is made upon your brain. In other words, almost as soon as the idea is formed in my mind it is in yours; and if it be the truth of God which I speak, that truth has power to touch your mind, your conscience, your heart, your will, to convince you, to convict you, to bring you to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, to sanctify

your spirit and make you a new man for time and for eternity. So possible is it for God to work spiritually through His word spoken. Is this any less true of His Word written? For what is this book in my hand, which we call the Bible? Is it only so many pounds of leather and paper and printers' ink? Are not the mind and heart and will, the very Spirit of the living God Himself, in the truth it contains? Has He not power to work through it spiritually in answer to prayer? "If, instead of merely praying for faith," said Mr. Moody once, "I had also read my Bible devoutly, I should have had faith a good deal sooner and a good deal more of it." And what is thus true of one of the means of grace is equally true of all. They are the ordinary channels through which spiritual blessings are to be sought and expected by believing, prayerful souls. If we cannot wholly understand the process of such giving, at least it does not seem unreasonable so far as we do seem able to understand it.

Thus we have considered some of the *objective* results of prayer; that is, its direct influence upon God.

III. But turn now to its *subjective* effects. See how it also reacts upon ourselves for good. "Some effects of prayer upon the soul," says Canon Liddon, "are natural consequences of directing the mind and the affections toward a superhuman object. . . . Thus persons without natural ability have, through the earnestness of devotional habits, acquired in time power of sustained thought. . . . Habitual prayer confers decision on the wavering, and energy on the listless, and calmness on the excitable, and disinterestedness on the selfish. . . . Prayer makes men as members of society to differ in their whole bearing from those who do not pray. . . . Prayer has even its physical effects. The countenance of a Fra Angelico reflects his spirit no less than does his act."<sup>1</sup> Even Professor Tyndall, in his discussion of "the prayer test," said: "It is not my habit of mind to think otherwise than solemnly of the feeling which prompts to prayer. Often unreasonable, even contemptible, in its purer forms prayer hints at disciplines which few of us can neglect without moral loss."

<sup>1</sup> "Elements," etc., p. 178.

Let us try to conceive reasonably of some such effects of prayer.

(1) Consider how *prayer tends to keep the soul dependent upon God*. Suppose that, like the prince in the fairy story, we had only to ask God once in a lifetime or once a year for all we wished for, in order to get it. Would that be for God's glory? Would it be for our good? What would be the result? Should we not become so absorbed in the gift that we should at once and altogether forget the gracious Giver? The followers of Zoroaster were bidden periodically to put out the fires on their hearths, and to rekindle them from the sacred fire in the temple, in order that they might not forget that fire was a heavenly gift. Is it not a blessed thing, then, that our Lord has taught us to pray, "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread"? and the dear Church to pray, "Keep us *this day* without sin"? Is it not so that we are helped to constantly remember Him from whom all blessings flow?

(2) See how *prayer helps to keep the soul open and receptive* to spiritual influence. If the trees

and flowers kept their leaves perpetually turned downward, could God bless them by His daily sunlight and nightly dew as He does now? And is it not the spirit and habit of prayer which, more than anything else, keeps our souls perpetually upturned and open in order that they too may receive blessing from God? God will supply our physical needs whether we ask Him to or not, but He cannot do this in spiritual things. Spiritual blessing is not possible unless the soul is first prepared for it by sincere, prayerful desire. In spiritual things desiring *is* receiving. Jesus not only promised, "Ask, and it shall be given you;" He also explained, "For every one that asketh receiveth."<sup>1</sup> And again He made it clear: "What things soever ye *desire*, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."<sup>2</sup> The Revised Version is even stronger here: "All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye *have received* them, and ye shall have them."

(3) *Prayer incites to action. It often turns us into God's agents to answer our own prayers.*

<sup>1</sup> St. Matt. vii. 8.

<sup>2</sup> St. Mark xi. 24.

In the realm of spiritual things desiring is doing as well as receiving. The condition of spiritual increase is to use the grace we pray for. "Watch!" said the Master, even while He bade us pray. Even the Lord's Prayer—that most objective of all prayers—has everywhere also its subjective side. You cannot pray long and earnestly, "Thy kingdom come," without getting up off your knees ready to do all that *you* can to bring about the coming of that kingdom. You cannot pray very fervently, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us," without forgiving them. "The petition, 'Deliver us from evil,' is idler than the breath which utters it unless it also means that we pledge ourselves to the utmost to fight evil."<sup>1</sup> Old Luther's maxim, "*Bene orare est bene laborare*" ("To pray well is to work all the better"), is literally true. "I fear John Knox's prayers," said Queen Mary of Scotland, "more than an army of ten thousand men."

See the meaning and value, in this connec-

<sup>1</sup> Dean Farrar on "The Lord's Prayer," p. 189, American edition.



tion, of *united* and *intercessory* prayer. Take one of the most remarkable examples in modern times of the results of such prayer. I refer to the great revival of 1857 in connection with the Fulton Street prayer-meeting in New York City. The story has been thrillingly told by the Rev. Dr. S. Irenæus Prime in a series of books entitled "The Power of Prayer," "Prayer and its Answer," etc. In 1857 a humble lay missionary in New York was moved, as a result of his own prayers, to establish a down-town noonday prayer-meeting for business men. The first day he prayed long alone; at last half a dozen persons strayed in and joined in the prayers. Day by day the attendance increased until the room would not hold the people. The interest and the movement spread rapidly. Many churches in the city established similar meetings. People of all Christian names and none took part in them. Thousands who had never prayed before prayed then. Thousands were converted—some from blank infidelity, many from lives of foulest sin and crime—to lives of faith and righteousness. At last the

movement began to spread like wild-fire all over the country. It was felt from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River. The total number of converts was something enormous. No such religious upheaval in America had been known since the days of Edwards and Whitefield.

There were two or three features of the movement which are especially noteworthy. There was no preaching of any kind at these meetings, no "revivalists" or revival machinery, no mere attempts to "rouse interest" or to "keep it up." "All," says Dr. Prime, "was still, solemn, awful." The great feature of the movement everywhere, its one great power and reliance, was prayer—Christian prayer, united prayer, intercessory prayer. Requests for prayer for others were ceaseless. Husbands, wives, children, friends, many of them at a distance, some on ships in mid-ocean, were prayed for and brought to repentance and faith. The facts as given in detail by Dr. Prime are surprising and seem substantially indisputable.

How shall we account for them? Say, if you

will, that all these so-called "answers to prayer" were only its subjective effects, the results of a sort of emotional contagion, the contagion of a certain prevalent spirit. Very well. Now what was that "spirit"? Spell it with a capital S, note its workings, and is it not just what was prayed for? Is it not just what Christ promised in answer to such prayers? Was it not the Holy Spirit of God doing His proper work, working out men's repentance, faith, and obedience, and manifesting Himself in changed characters and lives? If as Christians we believe in anything divine, how can we doubt the divine reality even in such so-called subjective effects of prayer?

(4) Again, *prayer leads us at length to adjust our wills to God's will*. If I am afloat in a small boat and want to get on board of a great ship to which I am attached, I may not by pulling on the rope be able to move the great ship perceptibly, but I can draw my little boat up to it. So it is one of the convictions—may we not call it a revelation?—which follows faithful though often disappointed prayer, that its true

purpose, after all, is not to pray God over to our side, but to pray ourselves over to His side. The highest, hardest reach of Christian faith and obedience is to be able to say, not in mere submission or resignation, but in all cheerful acquiescence, "Not my will, Father, but Thine, be done." And only the prayerful soul, often disappointed, learns that lesson thoroughly and lays it to heart as the best answer possible to its prayer, after all.

(5) Thus *prayer helps us to realize God* more vividly, perhaps, than in any other way. In spiritual communion with Him we *feel* the oneness of our spiritual life with His. Such an experience is the most subjectively literal fulfilment possible of the promise, "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you."<sup>1</sup> By prayer we are often transported out of ourselves, and not only feel ourselves passing, as it were, into the presence of God, but the very life of God manifesting itself also in us. Such, at least, was the effect of prayer—can you call it merely subjective?—in the case of the blessed

<sup>1</sup> St. James iv. 8.

Master. It was while "He was praying" at His baptism that "the heaven was opened" and the Spirit descended upon Him. It was "as He prayed" that "the fashion of His countenance was altered" and He was "transfigured" with a glory not of earth.

In short, all our religious life gains, as every other part of our life does, by the force of habit—by prayerfulness. Yet, strive as we may—sometimes successfully—to distinguish in thought the merely subjective effects of prayer from its objective effects, they do, in fact, so merge into one another as to be but parts, after all, of one and the same divine reality. "We trace the human upward," says Le Conte, "as we study more and more deeply; but as with upturned faces and straining, worshiping eyes we gaze, it is carried up from the comprehensible to the incomprehensible, from the finite to the infinite, from the human to the divine."<sup>1</sup>

Thus we have tried to see something, nevertheless, of *how* it is that God both can and does answer prayer.

<sup>1</sup> Page 44.

### LECTURE III.

#### WHY DOES NOT GOD ANSWER MY PRAYERS?

ONE more essential question remains to be considered. If it is true that God can both hear and answer prayer, then *why does he not answer my prayers?*

I. St. James states very clearly one reason why God does not always answer our prayers. "Ye ask, and receive not," he says, "*because ye ask amiss*, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."<sup>1</sup> Is not that too true? Are not our prayers altogether too often selfish prayers, prayers for mere temporal blessings on ourselves or on our own, prayers for our worldly success or for our personal comfort and happiness? But these are not the chief objects of prayer. God's

<sup>1</sup> St. James iv. 3.

promised blessings—under the gospel, at least—are not of a temporal kind, but spiritual. Would it be good for us if God gratified our every whim? See how it is with yourselves and your children. A hundred times a day your little ones ask you for all sorts of indulgences, and you love to have them do so; but would it be right and best in you to give them all they ask for? Do you not, in your very wisdom and love for them, deny them much which you know would harm them? Now notice how the Master turns this homely fact round and brings it to bear on us. “If ye then,” He says, “being evil [that is, with all your unwisdom and imperfections], know how to give [only] good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give [only] good things [“give the Holy Spirit,” St. Luke has it] to them that ask Him?”<sup>1</sup> It is in the spirit of this truth that the Church always sums up her daily prayers: “Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of Thy servants, as may be most expedient for them.” You can trust

<sup>1</sup> St. Matt. vii. 11; St. Luke xi. 13.

God to answer your prayers on such a principle as that, can you not? and believe that

“ ’Tis goodness still which grants them or denies.”

II. Even such “ good things ” of “ His Spirit ” *God gives only on conditions*. How often those little words “ if ” and “ except ” occur in God’s promises, and how much they mean!

(a) Prayer, even for spiritual things, must be *believing* prayer. “ If ye shall ask anything in My name ” (that is, on My merits or intercession), said Jesus, “ I will do it.”<sup>1</sup>

(b) Prayer must be *humble* prayer, i.e., in perfect submission to God’s will. Even Jesus at His arrest would not ask for the ready legions of angels, because He believed that it would defeat His Father’s plans.

(c) Prayer must be *righteous* prayer. It is only “ the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man ” that “ availeth much.” “ The Lord is far from the wicked: but He heareth the prayer of the righteous.”<sup>2</sup> Even the prayer of the self-righteous Pharisee was unheard,

<sup>1</sup> St. John xiv. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. xv. 29.



while the penitent publican went down to his house justified.

(d) Prayer must be *obedient* prayer. "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."<sup>1</sup> How can He? There is no room in the same heart for humility before God and resentment against one's fellow-man. Recall the parable of The Unmerciful Servant.

(e) Prayer must be also *secret, fervent, persevering, importunate*, to get an answer from God. God gives only on conditions.

III. But now, before you complain that God has not answered your prayers, be sure—be perfectly sure—that He has not done so. It may be that He *has* answered them, not in the way you wished, perhaps, but in a way far better than you either asked or thought. The disciple cannot be above his Master; it is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master.

(a) And how was it with the Master? Think of Him on that night of His agony, when His sensitive flesh drew back in horror from the

<sup>1</sup> St. Matt. vi. 15.

pain, and His equally sensitive soul from all the ignominy and desolation of the looming cross. Look at Him as He lies prone upon the earth, His face buried in the very dust, and the sweat of His suffering running down as it were great drops of blood. Listen as, no less than three separate times, He beseeches His Father to deliver Him, and at last asks only for grace to submit. Then recall what we are told elsewhere about Him: "Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplication with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared."<sup>1</sup> Heard? But how? Not in taking away the pain and shame of the cross, but in strengthening Him to bear them; not in ignoring His Sonship, but in helping Him, even "though He was a Son, [still] to learn obedience by the things which He suffered"; not in giving Him over unto death, but in leading Him to submit to death, that so He might abolish death forevermore. So was His prayer answered; not the prayer for deliverance, but the

<sup>1</sup> Heb. v. 7.

prayer for submission. So, not His will, but His Father's, was done—which was what He asked. So the already perfect spirit of obedience in Him became at length the perfect virtue of obedience, and the salvation of a world was made sure.

(*b*) Is there no counterpart of all this in our own experience? Have there not been days of suffering and sorrow in our lives, when it seemed as if all our prayers for deliverance were unanswered, until we too were willing that a higher and wiser will than our own should be done? And did we not find out at length how through all God was working out in us a higher life of faith, crucifying our selfishness and self-sufficiency, and drawing us nearer to Himself in a new dependence and trust and obedience? Was not that a better answer than any we ourselves had asked or even thought of? "Here, then," says one, most beautifully, "we come to the prayer which is efficacious, to the domain in which prayer is all-powerful and never fails of its answer. He who has prayed in agony of soul, every fiber of his being quivering with

dread of the cup presented to his lips, *knows* that his prayer is answered when the angels of strong patience and enduring faith descend into his heart, ministering the peace of perfect trust till he can take the cup with unfaltering hand and drain it, saying, 'My Father, not my will, but Thine, be done.' He who in the dark storm of doubt and temptation has prayed for light, only for light to see the truth and the right, *knows* that his prayer is answered when a path becomes visible in which he is constrained to tread, let it lead where it may. Those, again, to whom prayer is not only petition, but communion, they also *know* that their prayers are answered when, in the hush of midnight or the pause in the toil and turmoil of the day, they lift up their hearts to that Presence whose holiness shames all impurity, whose will shames all selfishness, whose ceaseless activity shames all faint-hearted sloth. To tell these that they first imagine the strength, the light, the help they are conscious of receiving, and then account for them by imagining a God who answers prayer, is neither a more nor less valid

argument than to say that we first imagine the impressions we are conscious of receiving through our senses and then invent an external world to account for them.”<sup>1</sup>

IV. Even if some of our prayers seem never to have been answered here in this world, let us be sure that they are at least accepted of God if offered in the name of Jesus Christ; and let us remember what a blessed hope and assurance we have that they will be answered at length in another world. Both the Word of God and our own innate longings for immortality combine to make us sure that “the withheld completions” of our spiritual life here shall be fulfilled there. In that marvelous picture which the pen of inspiration has drawn of the worship of heaven, our spiritual intuitions receive their highest confirmation that the sincere desires of God’s people for the things of God will not have been forgotten. For we read, “When He [the Lamb] had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and

<sup>1</sup> See Karstlake, p. 88.

golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints.”<sup>1</sup> The prayers of saints! “How remarkable it would seem to us,” said Henry Ward Beecher, “if it were revealed to us that there dwelt in the air a race of fine and fairy spirits, whose work it was to watch all the flowers of the earth and catch their perfumed breath and present it in golden vials for heavenly use! But how much more grand is the thought that all over the earth God’s angels have caught the heart’s breath, its prayers and love, and that in heaven they are before God like precious odors poured out from golden vases by saintly hands!”

V. Add to this now the testimony of the saints of all ages. The best men of all times have uniformly believed, on their own experience, in answers to prayer. On such a subject such evidence more than outweighs a few theoretical objections and difficulties. The testimony of the Spirit within ourselves answering to this witness of the people of God in all ages; the lives of those who pray sincerely; the promises of what we believe to be the Word of God;

<sup>1</sup> Rev. v. 8.

the assurance that, if Christianity be true at all, then "He who spared not His own Son will, with Him, freely give us all things"—all justify as reasonable our faith in a prayer-answering God. The force of such an argument is cumulative and final, if not to the point of absolute certainty, at least to that of overwhelming probability. That is all that faith has a right to ask.

In short, as the evidence for any scientific fact is the evidence of all scientific truth, as, for example, the evidence for the rotation of the earth is nothing less than the whole science of astronomy, so the evidence for a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God is nothing short of whole Christianity—in revelation, in experience, in history.<sup>1</sup>

"This," then, "is the confidence that we have in God, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him."<sup>2</sup>

VI. In conclusion let me say:

(1) That I am perfectly aware that these

<sup>1</sup> See Le Conte, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> 1 St. John v. 14, 15.



lectures on "the reasonableness of prayer" do not amount to an absolute demonstration of the subject. They were not expected to. The subject, even including the fact of our own personal experience, belongs distinctly to the realm of faith, not that of knowledge—at least, only to that kind of knowledge which comes by faith. There are difficulties connected with it—necessarily so, as we have seen. These can largely, as we have also seen, be removed by still further careful thought along the very lines where they occur. On the other hand, there is this reassurance: that no process of reasoning, "no mere natural science, no matter how complete, can ever demonstrate that it is impossible that there may be a God, or that He may manifest Himself in their measure to other personal spirits along lines other than those of the senses and by methods different from those of natural observation and experience."<sup>1</sup> Given the existence and nature of the human soul and our corresponding conceptions of God, given the facts of our spiritual experience confirming

<sup>1</sup> Du Bose's "Councils," p. 3.



the teachings of revelation, there is more than enough in these to make the idea and practice of prayer reasonable. Enough, at least, has been said here, I trust, to confirm such a faith in you and strengthen some wavering souls. For nowhere else more truly than in connection with prayer does the spiritual principle hold good, that according to your faith, so shall it be unto you.

(2) Believe on, then, in God as a Father, who has "ears to hear, a heart to feel, and a hand to help." Trust your own heart and His even more than your head in such a matter. Pray on for yourselves and for others, sure that prayer is one of the mightiest forces in the universe—yes, that it is able to set in motion, perhaps, all the mightiest forces of the universe. You remember how long the World's Fair at Chicago was a-preparing. All the latest triumphs of human thought and skill were there displayed for our instruction and gratification. When all things were ready, the President of the United States, who was at hand, pressed a little button. The electric current instantly sped away to a

lever on the great engine in Machinery Hall; at once the great fly-wheel began to revolve. Gradually it communicated its own motion to every one of the ten thousand machines and devices for man's comfort and pleasure. Almost at the same instant the bands began to play, flags were thrown to the breeze, the fountains cast up their waters, and a great shout of astonishment and admiration at what man had done, went up from a hundred thousand throats. So with reference to this strange thing called prayer, which God has placed so fully at our command: it has power to move a lever in the throne of God, which is able to move a world. The science of astronomy, by its law of gravitation, binds the whole universe of space together about one common center. The science of geology, by its principle of evolution, binds the whole universe of time together about one common starting-point.<sup>1</sup> So the science of religion, by its principle of faith expressed in prayer, "binds back" the world of human life about the same common source

<sup>1</sup> Le Conte.

—in God. As Tennyson so beautifully reminds us :

“ More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. . . .  
For what are men better than sheep or goats,  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “ Morte d’Arthur.”









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